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It is urged that the teacher be familiar with the language patterns of his pupils. A case is cited in which a teacher attempted to teach romantic poetry to a class of teenagers. They responded with boredom. A poem by Langston Hughes entitled, "Motto," expressed in "jive" language was introduced to the same class and immediately captured the students' interest. Making use of the students' jargon stimulated interest in poetry.

The author recommends that the teacher let his pupils teach him their language. An insight into oral communication can prove significant to understanding problems of disadvantaged children. The dialogue of interaction taking place between the author and the students as they discussed the poem is included.

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"DO YOU DIG ALL JIVE"

By Gerald Weinstein

I was sitting at my desk, when suddenly a very excited English teacher burst into my office.

"Oh!", she exclaimed, "I don't know what to do. I'm so disgusted!"

"About what?" I asked.

"About trying to teach these kids anything."

"What were you trying to teach?" I asked.

"Well, I tried a poetry lesson, and I'm telling you, when I finished reading it to them and tried to get a discussion going, they practically fell asleep on me. I couldn't do anything to shake them up. How do you do poetry with them? Can't you help me?"

"Gee, I don't know. What was the poem you tried?"

"It's a poem from our literature anthology...called 'The Magic Carpet'."

She showed me a copy of the poem. I noticed that it was sweet and kindly; typical of what one finds an "approved" literature anthology.

"I really don't know if I can help you Mrs. Baker, but...why don't you give me a couple of days to see if I can come up with something?"

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She agreed with a rather resigned shrug, and left.

Sometime during the next few days, I was looking through my materials when I came across an anthology of Langston Hughes poetry. As I scanned through the volume, I was struck by a poem entitled "Motto".

> I play it cool,
> And dig all jive.
> That's the reason I stay alive,
> My motto, as I live and learn,
> Is: To dig and be dug
> In return.

I ran off about thirty copies, and with the permission of the English teacher, took them into her classroom. The children stared at me, probably wondering what I was up to. Without saying a word, I distributed the copies of the poem so that each child had one.

There was a moment or two of silence while they read the poem. Finally, I heard someone mumble, "Tough!", followed by, "Hey now, this is really though man!"

Being somewhat familiar with their jargon, I realized that they paid the poem a supreme compliment, although it probably didn't appear that way to the other teacher.

"Hey now, ... this cat's pretty cool. Who wrote it?"

"Langston Hughes", I answered.

"Who's he?"

"He's a very famous Negro author, poet, and playwright."

I saw that most of the class hadn't heard of him.

"Do you know what this poem is talking about?" I asked them.

"Sure", they said.

"how come?"

"Well, it's written in our talk."

"Oh! then you understand everything this is saying?"

"Sure", they said.

"What's good. Maybe you can tell me then. What's that first line mean about playing it cool?"

They had great difficulty in verbalizing the concept of coolness.

"Are there any brave souls in here that would like to try something with me?"

A boy's hand shot up.

"Good!, come up here. Now I'm a teacher standing in the middle of the hallway. You're coming toward me down the hall, but you're walking on the wrong side. Now I'm going to tell you something, and when I do, I want you to play it cool. Okay?"

"Yeah", he said.

The boy started walking toward me, and I said in a very fierce manner, "Hey you! you're walking on the wrong side of the hallway...get over where you belong!"

The boy very calmly, without raising his head, moved with deliberate slowness to the other side of the hall, and sauntered on as if I never existed.

"Is that playing it cool?" I asked the class.

They agreed that it was.

"I'll tell you what," I said to my volunteer, "Let's do the same thing, only this time show us what would happen if you didn't play it cool."

"Okay," he said.

Our little scene began again. But this time, after I had ordered him to get over to where he belonged, he stopped and angrily said, "Who you talkin' to?"

"To you!", I said.

"I ain't doin' nothin'!"

He became very beligerant and a hot verbal battle ensued.

I stopped the scene before it got any hotter, and said to the class,--
"Well...what's the difference between playing it cool and not playing it cool?"

Finally, one pupil came up with,--
"When you're cool, you're calm and collected."

"Very good", I said, writing the words 'calm' and 'collected' on the board.

"Any one else?"

They were able to supply a few more words. I then gave them a few that I knew such as "indifferent" and "nonchalant". They were especially intrigued by "nonchalant", and kept repeating it aloud to themselves.

"Now how about this word 'jive' in the second line..'And dig all jive'?"

One pupil said, "It means Jazz."

Another told how jive in the expression "stop jiven' me" meant "teasing".

Finally, a third boy chimed in with this incident.

"I was in another city once, walkin' through a strange neighborhood. These guys were standin' on the corner and one of them, he yells to me, 'Hey man, cut that stroll!' Now I never heard that before, so I turned and said, 'What?' That's all I had to do. If there wasn't a cop on the corner, I might've been messed up good."

"Do you know what 'stroll' means now?" I asked.

"Oh yeah!, it's when you're walking' like this."

He proceeded to demonstrate. It was a walk with a limping gait or strut that I have seen our children use many times. It seemed to generate a "devil-may-care", or "watch out, it's me", attitude.

"It's like they were tellin' me," the boy continue, "that I was walkin' too big to suit them."

"How does all this show what the word jive means?'

"Well, I just didn't dig their jive and almost got messed up."

"Then what's another word for jive as you have just used it?"

"I guess..talk, a kind of talk", he answered. "This here poem is written in jive talk."

"Do you think that 'all jive' in this poem could mean 'all kind of talk'?"

They nodded in agreement.

"What does 'dig' mean?"

Again we compiled our multiple meanings on the board: To dig someone is to like someone; to dig someone later is to see someone later; finally, to dig something is to understand it.

When I asked them which of the three meanings fit in best with "dig all jive", they readily agreed that "to understand" was it!

We continued in a similar vein to the end of the poem. The final interpretation being, "to understand and be understood in return", was the poets' rule for life.

"How many kinds of jive do you understand?" I asked them.

"Oh, we understand all of it."

"You do, do you? Well let's see if you can understand my kind of jive. Okay?"

"Go ahead", they said.

I then proceeded to give an elaborate oral essay on the nature of truth, using some of the most complicated words I could think of. At the conclusion, I said to them, "Did you dig my jive?"

They looked at me blankly.

Then I said, "Now let's see if I can dig yours. Would you like to test me?"

They responded eagerly. Expressions were thrown at me. I was able to get five out of six which impressed them greatly.

"According to Langston Hughes, who has a better chance of staying alive, me or you?"

"You."

"Why?"

"You dig more than one kind of jive."

"Alright, " I said, "I think I agree with Mr. Hughes and I feel very lucky that I do understand many kinds of talk. In certain situations I'm able to use one kind of jive and in others, another kind. But you sitting in this class have, up to this point, only mastered only one kind, and one that I think is very beautiful. But it still is only <u>one</u>. You've got to dig the school jive as well as your own, and also jive that might be needed in other situations. That's what school is for; to help you dig all jive and help

you stay alive."

Mrs. Baker, the English teacher, commented afterwards that it was the first time that she had seen the class so deeply involved in a lesson.

"I couldn't believe my ears. I saw some pupils participate today that haven't opened their mouths since the beginning of the term."

Shortly after that day, various pupils stopped me in the hallway asking me where they could find more of Langston Hughes poetry. I allowed the anthology to circulate. And circulate it did. It was difficult for me to get the book back.

Working with the English teacher, we developed a unit on Langston Hughes poetry. Her pupils read and discussed some of his other poems that had a high interest level, but were written in more conventional language. They found that poetry could be an enjoyable experience, and were eventually willing to go on with other kinds.

From this lesson, I was able to glean a few generalizations that I would like to share.

Knowing The Language Pattern Of Your Pupils

If you are familiar with the language patterns of your pupils, you have a great advantage. If I had gone into the classroom and were completely ignorant of how they used words, their initial reaction to the poem, expressed as "tough", might have demoralized me at the outset.

My whole strategy was to select a poem that would make immediate contact. Not knowing what "tough" meant, I might have thought the strategy a failure. It could easily have changed the whole course and tone of the lesson.

Time and time again, I have seen some typically middle-class oriented teachers commit a serious faux-pas before a class. They would use, what to them was an innocent expression, but to the pupils it connotated something very different. The result; tumult on the part of the children; utter amazement and shock on the part of the teacher.

If I hadn't been familiar with some of their jargon, I would probably never have selected "Motto" for use in class and thereby, missed an opportunity for making contact.

Then too, the point of the lesson which was the fact that I knew a few kinds of "jive", and had a better chance of staying alive, would have been missed. The pupils could have easily said to me, and with good reason, "Why should we learn yours, you never learned ours?"

There is another important advantage in knowing their language patterns. When you begin to analyze the reasons for the pattern, as well as the specific choice of terminology, you begin to get some insight into your pupils and their problems as members of a disadvantaged group.

An excellent example of this kind of analysis was done in the April 1962, New York Time Sunday Magazine Section; in an article entitled, "If You're Woke, You Dig It".

But, you may be asking, where does the teacher get this background? Where can you learn the language pattern of your pupils? It certainly doesn't get to you in teacher-training institutions.

The answer is really simple, that is, if you're willing to take a little time. HAVE YOUR PUPILS TEACH IT TO YOU.

By jotting a few of their expressions on the board and having the pupils demonstrate their use, you can teach as well as learn by offering them synonyms for their expressions. Not only will this permit you to learn their patterns in a very painless fashion, but you will also be taking a big step forward in establishing rapport with your pupils. They might be pleased, if not surprised, to find a teacher, who is not only accepting of their particular language pattern, but who is even interested enough to want to learn more about it. Who knows, you may be culturally enriched in the process!